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SUBJECT: (S) ANOTHER NORTHERN LEADER CLAIMS CONTACT WITH
HOSTAGE TAKERS

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Classified By: Ambassador Gillian Milovanovic for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(S) On January 30 former National Assembly Deputy from Bourem, Mohamed ould Mataly, told a Malian official he knew where the four European hostages captured on January 22 south of the Mali-Niger border were located and was in contact with the hostage takers. The Malian official subsequently relayed this information to British representatives now in Bamako. Earlier in the day on January 30 the Embassy met with one of the newly arrived British officials to discuss the unfolding hostage crisis, offer tips on northern leaders of consequence (including ould Mataly), and provide recommendations for navigating the Malian government. As reports indicating that the four tourists have already been passed to AQIM increase, we believe it important for those following this crisis to understand the Malian government's likely response, or lack thereof. While it is possible that Mali will regard the two simultaneous hostage crises as a threat to Mali's international image and internal security, Mali is more likely to view the missing tourists and Canadian diplomats as neither an urgent issue nor a Malian problem. As a result, President Toure will lean toward the path of least resistance - non-action - unless one or more of the nations with citizens now captive in northern Mali make a concerted, and calculated, effort to move President Toure in a different direction. End Summary.

Ould Mataly Claims Contact with Kidnappers

2.(S) On January 30 Ministry of Territorial Administration official Kader Bah informed the Embassy that the former National Assembly Deputy from the northern town of Bourem, Mohamed ould Mataly, had contacted him with the claim to be in touch with those holding the four European tourists kidnapped on January 22 in Niger south of the Malian town of Anderamboukane. According to Bah, Mataly specified that he

did not want to work with any Malian officials who had been involved in negotiations for the release of the two Austrian hostages in 2008. Bah said Mataly chose to contact him, as opposed to more regular channels such as those leading to Director General for State Security (DGSE) Chief Col. Mamy Coulibaly, because ould Mataly felt burned by Austrian false promises and the conniving of other Malian officials who prevented ould Mataly from receiving a percentage of Austria's reported payoff to AQIM.

3.(S) Mohamed ould Mataly is a Telemsi Arab from the town of Bourem north of Gao. He lost his National Assembly seat in July 2007 to Ibrahim ag Mohamed Asselah - a Tuareg who later became one of the northern leaders implicated in Austria's effort to win the release of their hostages from AQIM. Using a satellite phone, Mataly called Bah several times on January 130. Bah guessed that Mataly was located somewhere near Almoustrat or Tarkint. At one point Mataly reportedly started to enumerate demands from the hostage takers, but Bah said he cut him off, stating that he didn't want to hear any demands without first receiving proof of life for the four Europeans and an update on their medical conditions from the hostage takers. Bah then recommended Mataly return to Bamako for consultations.

4.(S) On February 3 Bah contacted the Embassy again to say that he was in touch with British representatives and that Mataly had returned to Bamako. Bah told the Embassy that Mataly had requested three items from the British: a document from the British commissioning Mataly to seek information on the hostages' whereabouts; a satellite telephone to keep in contact with the British; and various provisions - such as dates and tea - to offer not to the hostages but to those reportedly holding them in order to ease discussions. The British requested proof of life from Mataly before entering

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into discussion about any subsequent deliverables. Bah told the Embassy he would relay this to Mataly on February 3, and that if Mataly refused, Bah intended to withdraw from the entire hostage affair.

5.(S) Bah said ould Mataly wanted a document from the British in order to "earn the trust" of the hostage takers by proving that he was a legitimate intermediary. A more likely explanation is that ould Mataly has learned from his mistake with the Austrians and hopes to get something in writing from the U.K. to ensure that this time around nothing slips through his fingers. On February 4 Bah told the Embassy that the British were giving ould Mataly the "run around" and were demanding specific information that ould Mataly was either unable or unwilling to supply. As a result, said Bah, ould Mataly was now shopping his wares to the Germans.

Where Are They Now?

6.(S) Together with the Mayor of Tarkint, ould Mataly is believed to be in close touch with northern Mali's community of illicit traffickers, both Arab and Tuareg. If ould Mataly's claims are accurate, it would seemingly indicate that the hostages have been passed to either Malian Arabs north of Gao or to AQIM. On February 3 Kader Bah told the Embassy he believed the hostages had been passed by Tuareg traffickers to a group of Malian Arab traffickers. On February 2 Sikabar ag Oufene, a Tuareg who had previously claimed to be in contact with two Tuaregs widely suspected of having participated in the actual kidnapping of the four tourists south of Anderamboukane on the Niger side of the Mali border, also contacted the Embassy to say that he believed the tourists were no longer in Tuareg hands and had been passed off to either Malian Arabs or the "bearded ones," meaning AQIM.

7.(S) On February 4 Sikabar contacted the Embassy again to

let us know that he and Kidal Chamber of Commerce president Abdousalam ag Assalat had been summoned by DGSE chief Mamy Coulibaly the evening before to discuss ways of locating the hostages now that they no longer appear to be with Malian Tuaregs. Sikabar said Coulibaly discussed whether Tuareg rebel Ahmed Anakib, who was captured by the Malian army on January 12, could provide any help (Ref. A). Mali apparently believes that Anakib headed the Tamanrasset based cell of traffickers to which one of the Tuaregs suspected of participating in the abduction of the four European tourists, Intewika ag Ahmayed (aka Ousmane), belonged. Sikabar and ag Assalat subsequently telephoned Anakib's brother in Kidal, promising to put him in touch with Anakib from his Bamako prison cell in return for other, unspecified information.

Briefing the Brits

8.(S) Prior to meeting with Bah on January 30, we met with a British political officer recently arrived in Mali from the British High Commission in Abuja. The British asked us about two northern leaders, Sikay ag Ekawel and Assarid ag Imbarcaouane. Ag Ekawel is a Chamanamas Tuareg from Gao who was frequently cited by other Malian Tuaregs and Malian government officials as a potential intermediary when the four tourists were believed to be in the hands of Chamanamas Tuaregs north of Menaka and Anderamboukane. On January 29, ag Ekawel appeared at the Embassy under the mistaken assumption that he had a meeting with us when, in fact, he had agreed to visit the Canadian Embassy. We met with ag Ekawel for about 15 minutes before sending him to the Canadians. Ag Ekawel, who is probably in his late fifties or early sixties, appeared extremely disoriented and said he had traveled from Gao to Bamako the day before for medical consultations. At one point, he wrote down a telephone number without realizing that no ink was flowing from his pen. He then asked the Embassy to verify that he had written the number correctly.

9.(S) Ag Imbarcaouane is the 2nd vice president of the Malian National Assembly and an Imghad Tuareg from Gao. Although ag Imbarcaouane is supposedly among those advising President Toure on northern issues, during meetings with the Embassy ag

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Imbarcaouane has proved remarkably uninformed. On January 1, 2009, unknown assailants threw a hand grenade into ag Imbarcaouane's residential compound in Gao. Grenades were also thrown at the residences of two other influential Imghad Tuaregs in Gao. The British asked us if we believed the grenade attacks were carried out by individuals unhappy about not receiving a cut of the money supposedly paid out by the Austrians for the release of their two hostages in 2008. We said that we regarded the three grenade attacks on New Year's Day, and the subsequent grenade incidents on January 7 and 9, as the product of internal tensions between Tuareg Imghad and other local groups which had nothing to do with the Austrians or AQIM (Ref. B). We provided the names of a few other northern leaders of note from the Gao region including ould Mataly, Ibrahim ag Mohamed Asselah, and the National Assembly Deputy from Menaka, Bajan ag Hamato.

Malian View of Hostage Crises

10.(S) During recent meetings with our European colleagues we have noticed a tendency to presume that events in northern Mali (such as the January 2009 grenade incidents in Gao) are linked, in one way or another, to AQIM. A second presumption appears to be that Mali will regard the current hostage crises as a threat to Mali's image abroad or security within and will therefore play an active role in seeking to resolve the crises as quickly as possible. We have a slightly different view, which posits that Mali regards the hostage

situation as neither a pressing issue nor a specifically Malian problem.

11.(S) Since 2003, Mali has weathered a number of hostage crisis involving foreign tourists, Tuareg rebels, and Malian nationals. This includes the 2003 kidnapping of 32 western tourists by the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in Algeria, the brief abduction of a Pakistani and Qatari by a Berabiche group in 2004, the 2006 capture of Tuareg rebels by AQIM (Ref. C), the capture of as many as 100 Malians soldiers and civilians by Tuareg rebels in 2007 and 2008, the two Austrian tourists in 2008, and now the two Canadian diplomats, their Nigerien driver, and the four European tourists. In only one of these cases - the 2004 abduction of a Pakistani and Qatari game hunter by Berabiche near Lerneb between Timbuktu and the Mauritanian border - did the Malian military take rapid and decisive action, tracking the hostage takers across northern Mali and then attacking them, killing two and capturing others while freeing the two hostages northwest of Kidal near Aguelhok (Ref. D).

12.(S) When Tuareg rebels abducted scores of Malian soldiers and several civilian officials during 2007 and 2008, Mali's position was generally to let events play out. Limited attempts to win these hostages' release, both successful and unsuccessful, were undertaken by self-commissioned Tuareg delegations or the Libyan government. The presumption that the abduction of four European tourists, two Canadian diplomats, and their Nigerien driver will cause President Toure to embark on a course of action that he studiously avoided when Malian nationals were at risk appears rather tenuous.

13.(S) During the Austrian hostage crisis, President Toure described the Austrians' presence on Malian territory as an embarrassment to Mali (Ref. E). However, Mali has historically viewed the "bearded ones" as an Algerian terrorist group dedicated to the overthrow of the Algerian government. Since the GSPC re-branded itself as al Qaeda, we have made some progress in sensitizing President Toure to the dangers posed by AQIM, yet Mali's leadership still regards AQIM as largely an Algerian problem (Ref. F). In 2008 President Toure told visiting AFRICOM Commander, General Ward, that there would be no Islamists in Mali if only Algeria, as opposed to Mali, could control its borders (Ref. G).

14.(S) Nor are we convinced that fear of a damaged international image and lost tourism revenues will greatly impact Malian decision processes as far as the hostages are concerned. When Timbuktu lost tens of thousands of dollars following the cancellation of the Timbuktu stage of the Dakar rally in 2007, Malian officials denied there was a threat to

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rally participants, preferring instead to question French motivations for raising security concerns (Ref. H). Two years later, Malian officials are more candid about the threat posed by AQIM but there is still a large gap between the levels of western concern and that of the Malian government. Mali's tourism revenue is already paltry and those who go to northern Mali are generally extreme tourists who spend little and may even be attracted by the heightened sense of danger, not repelled.

Comment: The Long Haul

15.(S) With reports indicating that the four European tourists may have already been passed to AQIM, and various "good Samaritans" coming out of the desert to peddle information in return for a piece of the presumed payoff, the British, German, Swiss and Canadian representatives may be in Bamako for quite some time. Unless there is a concerted attempt by one or more of these nations to deftly move

President Toure in a particular direction, Mali will likely
be content to sit back and wait along with everyone else.

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